



morris
PAINTINGS graves
1931-97

Now in his ninth decade, Morris Graves remains a singular and fascinatingly elusive presence, an artist whose work the mainstream has found no easier to embrace than to ignore. Born in 1910, Graves was the sixth of eight children of a peripatetic Oregon entrepreneur and his (presumably long-suffering) wife. The family eventually settled in the mother's home town of Seattle, but the

artist would recall how "reality [for his father] dissolved in expectation, and there was often a mystery about his absences."¹ Graves had a sickly childhood, and later said that his family felt he "was designed by nature never to accomplish anything that they held valuable." With isolation came a certain liberty, however, and one may wonder how frail the boy really was, since by the age of seventeen he was traveling as a merchant seaman. Something like his father's itinerant existence had exer-

cised its lure over the young man, though less as a desire for movement as such than as the quest for something like a spiritual home: "I was in search of a cultivated life, an established history, of any place away from Seattle."

How did Graves form his idea of such a "life," in an environment which must have seemed to lack all its elements? We can presume that he sooner or later found his



Little Known Bird of the Inner Eye #1, 1941

quest to be illusory, since he ended up choosing something more like the isolation from which he had started, and in much the same place: most of Graves' life has been tied to the Pacific Northwest, where he still lives today. A stay in suave New Orleans in 1932 began to reveal, by contrast, his affinity with all he had run away from. "The city brought me up against my upbringing. The Bohemian life, the sensuality, the endless talk, the lounging and postponements turned me away with a sense of contamination."

Still, by the time destitution brought Graves back to the family home later that year, he was assuredly an artist, and in 1933 one of his paintings was awarded a prize in the Seattle Art Museum's Northwest Annual. The prize money went to convert a rented stable into a studio. Around this time, too, Graves met Guy Anderson and Kenneth Callahan, two young artists who were drawn, as he was, into the orbit of the better-known and older Seattle painter Mark Tobey. For a time the four of them were known as a local "school." John Cage became Graves' lifelong friend and admirer around this time as well.

Works from these years, such as *Water Birds* (1933), show Graves' interest in using painterly texture, a patterning of individually legible strokes, to integrate his imagery into a consistent surface. Others, among them *Sidewalk Drinking Fountain* (1934–35) or *Abandoned World War I Fortification, Whidbey Island, Washington* (1934–35), show how he wedded this formal preoccupation to direct observation, although his focus on the static, isolated object within an oneiric atmosphere connotes an otherworldly, "metaphysical" vein—something that becomes even more obvious in studies of completely decontextualized objects

such as the chalice in *Psalm* (1934).

These Depression years must have been unspeakably difficult, but in 1936 Graves was given support by the Federal Art Project of the WPA. This not only meant a certain economic security, but led to his first national recognition; in 1939 an exhibition of works from the Project was organized by The Museum of Modern Art, and four of Graves' paintings were included. By 1942, he had a series of steady successes—more paintings at The Museum of Modern Art, in its "Americans 1942" exhibition, and in the Whitney Annual, as well as at the Phillips Gallery (now the Phillips Collection), not to mention a one-artist show with the Willard Gallery. But in other ways, Graves remained an outsider: 1942 was also the year his conscientious objection to military service led to difficult legal proceedings and imprisonment in an Army stockade.

Still, the exhibitions and honors continued. A Guggenheim Fellowship came in 1946. (It is perhaps an indication of Graves' peculiar blend of restlessness and indifference to anything not "inward" that, having planned to use his Guggenheim for a trip to Japan, he stopped short in Honolulu, where he painted a group of "portraits" of Chinese ritual bronzes he saw in the Academy of Art there.) By this time, his technique had grown more refined and less tactile, his compositions more fluid. Things have become elusive, more poignant, but with clarity of line a cunning wit emerges as well. In *Little Known Bird of the Inner Eye #1* (1941), the bird's white body is nearly invisible within its white atmosphere, but its spindly legs and head, like an Ionic capital, emerge with almost caricatural distinctness. This bird is unaware that it is the bird of the inner eye—an insight worthy of the Zen masters who always undercut any will to sanctimonious profundity.



Zen Buddhism is

always mentioned in discussing Graves, and rightly so, since the artist has never ceased to signal its importance to his way of seeing. But it should also be noted that Buddhism has been a vehicle rather than a destination. Just as his constant search for "home" has called for a recurrent restlessness—for a long time, in the late fifties and early sixties, rural Ireland was as good a place to be alone as Puget Sound—so Graves' spiritual search seems to have left no religious path unexplored. How many other artists have lived in Father Divine's Peace Mission in Harlem, as Graves did for five months in the thirties? His artistic path as well has been more various than might at first be obvious, and Parker Tyler may have been right to claim that "Graves...is more pertinently marked as an American fantastic romantically drawn to all points of the esthetic compass and inclined to flirt with them as a genius rather than husband them as a disciple."²

Despite the support of luminaries like Alfred Barr and Duncan Phillips, Graves' art met resistance as well. The ambivalence it aroused is summed up in the extraordinary contradiction embodied in "The Present Prospects of American Painting and Sculpture," a 1947 essay by Clement Greenberg. There the dean of American art critics declared Graves, along with Tobey, to be "the two most original American painters working today," yet nonetheless concluded that their work was "so narrow as to cease even being interesting."³ While it's normal for significant art to arouse contention and controversy, it's a rare thing when it provokes the same critic to rebut himself from one sentence to the next.

In a sense, the resistance aroused by Graves' art has something to do with a difficulty in determining the *location* of his subject,

somewhere between the surface of things and their idea—between the bird as warm-blooded vertebrate and as perennial symbol of the soul. Greenberg imagined that he'd hit home when he charged that "for all its emphasis on inwardness, Graves's eye is not really inward enough."⁴ What he meant was something like this: Graves, like the modernist pioneers of abstract painting, was attempting to represent an inner, spiritual reality rather than the world of appearances; but his insistence on depicting that interior reality by means of observed realities treated as symbols constituted a backward-looking compromise, one that left him shouldering all the baggage of "literary" subject matter that had been jettisoned by European modernists like Kandinsky or Mondrian. And that an exponent of representational empiricism was no more satisfied by Graves' path than a champion of abstraction becomes evident from the reaction, several years later, of Fairfield Porter, who sniffed that "Graves uses an exquisite technique in which the line exists almost for itself alone to express exquisite ideas that are not painting or drawing ideas."⁵ Again, it was the literary content—the evocation of a reality beyond the visible—that rankled.

Perhaps criticism like Greenberg's and Porter's eventually did hit home, although Graves has not abandoned his indifference to both abstraction on the one hand and the realist's adherence to empirical reality on the other. Nevertheless, in the latter part of his career, Graves' subjects

have changed, and his paintings have become more formal and understated. There is a new kind of silence at work in them. Flowers have become more important than birds, which is perhaps to say that appearances have become more profound than essences. "I have stopped trying to say anything about anything—there is no statement or message other than the presence of the flowers and light—that is enough."⁶ Graves—like Wallace Stevens in his last years, a poet of "the plain sense of things"—could also express his determined withdrawal of literary content from his painting in more forceful terms: "I painted 'religious' pictures until I tired of the 'blat' of it!"⁷

Back in his "religious" phases, however, Graves had declared that "a religious work of Art states that which is eternal (Romantic works of Art are almost pathetically lonely)."⁸ By this definition, Graves' art has always been as romantic (that is, subjective, individualistic, turbulent) as it is religious (objective, universal, serene). His recent works, which have yet to be given their critical due, only emphasize the fact. The things he paints: his flowers and the vessels that sometimes hold them, sometimes stand empty, are as isolated as they were sixty years ago, still communing with themselves rather than communicating among each other. Only now they partake of a frosty, insubstantial, membrane-thin reality, nothing more tangible than that. No ulterior reality remains to be glimpsed beyond or through them, only their own suspended evanescence. Cage wrote of Graves that "his birds are not birds. They are invitations to events at which we are already present."⁹ True enough. But his flowers are really flowers, though seen in the light of he, we, and they being absent.

NOTES

1. Except where otherwise noted, quotations from Graves in this essay are taken from Frederick S. Wight, John I.H. Baur, and Duncan Phillips, *Morris Graves* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956).

2. Parker Tyler, "Mysticism, Pastiche and Graves," *Art News*, 55 (March 1956), p. 43.

3. Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. 2: *Arrogant Purpose, 1945-1949*, John O'Brian, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 165-66.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

5. [Fairfield (P)orter, "Morris Graves," *Art News*, 54 (December 1955), p. 55.

6. Graves, quoted in Ray Kass, *Morris Graves: Vision of the Inner Eye*, exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: The Phillips Collection, 1983), p. 73.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Morris Graves*, exh. brochure (New York: Willard Gallery, n.d.), n.p.

9. John Cage, "Series Re Morris Graves," in *The Drawings of Morris Graves* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1973), p. 20.

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Half Deer/Half Feline,
1952-53

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Summer (from *The Five Seasons*), 1997

This exhibition continues the branch museum's series of concentrations on works by American masters, a program instituted in 1982. It incorporates and expands on *Morris Graves: Early Paintings, 1932-38*, a traveling exhibition organized by the Museum of Northwest Art, La Conner, Washington. A catalogue, *Morris Graves: The Early Works*, by Theodore Wolff, has been published by the Museum of Northwest Art.

The exhibition was organized by Cynthia Roznoy, Branch Manager.

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WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

DIMENSIONS ARE IN INCHES, FOLLOWED BY CENTIMETERS; HEIGHT PRECEDES WIDTH

Brazilian Steamers, 1931

Oil on canvas, 42 x 42
(106.6 x 106.6)
Collection of Arlene and
Harold Schnitzer

Hooded Falcon with Urn, 1932

Oil on canvas, 30 x 27 1/2
(76.2 x 69.8)
Collection of the artist
courtesy Schmidt Bingham
Gallery, New York

Minnie, 1933

Oil on canvas, 19 x 19
(48.3 x 48.3)
Collection of Helen and
Marshall Hatch

Moor Swan, 1933

Oil on canvas, 36 x 34 1/2
(91.4 x 88.3)
Seattle Art Museum, Gift
of West Seattle Art Club,
Katherine B. Baker
Memorial Purchase Prize

Self-Portrait, 1933

Oil on canvas, 25 1/2 x 19 1/2
(64.7 x 50.2)
Seattle Art Museum, Gift
of Florence Weinstein in
memory of Max Weinstein

Water Birds, 1933

Oil on canvas, 21 1/2 x 36
(53.9 x 91.4)
Collection of the artist,
courtesy Schmidt Bingham
Gallery, New York

Wounded Brant, 1933

Oil on canvas, 29 1/2 x 35
(75.6 x 88.9)
Collection of the artist,
courtesy Schmidt Bingham
Gallery, New York

Morning, c. 1933

Oil on canvas, 38 x 47
(96.5 x 119.3)
Collection of Helen and
Marshall Hatch

Millennium Light, 1933-34

Oil on canvas, 39 x 40
(99 x 101.6)
Collection of Helen and
Marshall Hatch

Puyallup Horse, Washington State Farm Horse with Wild Fritillaria Flowers, 1933-34

Oil on canvas, 33 x 40
(83.8 x 101.6)
Collection of the artist,
courtesy Schmidt Bingham
Gallery, New York

Abandoned World War I Fortification, Whidbey Island Washington, 1934-35

Oil on canvas, 37 1/4 x 37
(94.6 x 93.9)
Collection of the artist,
courtesy Schmidt Bingham
Gallery, New York

Kid Goat in an Abandoned Garden, 1934-35

Oil on canvas, 53 x 36 1/2
(134.6 x 93.3)
Greenville County
Museum of Art, Greenville,
South Carolina, Museum
purchase with funds
from the Arthur and Holly
Magill Foundation and with
funds from the National
Endowment for the
Arts and the Foundation
for Contemporary
Performance Arts, Inc.
(by exchange)

Sidewalk Drinking Fountain, 1934-35

Oil on canvas, 28 1/2 x 18 1/2
(73 x 47.9)
Collection of the artist,
courtesy Schmidt Bingham
Gallery, New York

Urn, 1934-35

Oil on canvas, 24 1/2 x 10 1/2
(62.2 x 25.7)
Henry Art Gallery,
University of Washington,
Seattle, Margaret Callahan
Memorial Collection,
gift of Brian T. Callahan

Logged Mountain, 1935

Oil on canvas, 26 1/2 x 36 1/2
(66.4 x 91.8)
National Museum of
American Art, Smithsonian
Institution, Washington, D.C.

Still Life with Objects, 1935

Oil on canvas, 29 x 34
(73.6 x 86.4)
Collection of Helen and
Marshall Hatch

Summer Still Life, c. 1935

Oil on burlap, 44 x 39
(111.7 x 99)
Seattle Art Museum,
Purchased in memory of
Solomon Katz with
funds from the estate
of Mark Tobey and
contributions by friends
of Solomon Katz

Abandoned Homestead, c. 1935-36

Oil on canvas, 37 1/2 x
43 1/2 (94.9 x 110.6)
Henry Art Gallery,
University of Washington,
Seattle, Work Projects
Administration Art
Program

Departure Via Cedar, 1936

Oil on canvas, 41 1/2 x 35 1/2
(105.4 x 90.2)
Collection of Helen and
Marshall Hatch

Melancholy Day With Flower Bouquet in the Cemetery of an Abandoned Western Mining Town, 1936

Oil on canvas, 39 x 35
(99.1 x 88.9)
Collection of the artist,
courtesy Schmidt Bingham
Gallery, New York

Seattle Sidewalk Drinking Fountain (Night), 1936

Oil on canvas, 42 1/2 x 37
(107.3 x 93.9)
Collection of the artist,
courtesy Schmidt Bingham
Gallery, New York

Thompson Memorial Clock, 1936

Oil on canvas, 67 x 39 1/2
(170.2 x 100.3)
Collection of Mr. and Mrs.
Robert T. Ohashi

Altar, 1937

Oil on cardboard, 12 x 16
(30.5 x 40.6)
Collection of Helen and
Marshall Hatch

Spring Call with Plover, 1938-39

Oil on canvas, 43 x 38
(109.2 x 96.5)
Collection of the artist,
courtesy Schmidt Bingham
Gallery, New York

Untitled (Bird on Rail), 1940

Tempera on paper, 15 x 11
(38.1 x 27.9)
Collection of Richard E.
Salomon

Little Known Bird in the Inner Eye #1, 1941

Tempera on paper, 19 x
34 1/2 (48.3 x 87.6)
Private collection, courtesy
Schmidt Bingham Gallery,
New York

Journey, 1943

Gouache and watercolor
on paper, 22 1/2 x 30 1/2
(56.5 x 76.5)
Whitney Museum of
American Art, New York
Purchase 45.14



*Still Moment by the
Cascades, 1944*
Tempera on paper, 26 x
45 1/2 (66 x 115.6)
Collection of Glenn C
Janss

Japanese Young Pine, 1944
Watercolor and gouache
on paper mounted
on fabric, 53 1/2 x 27
(136.2 x 68.6)
The Museum of Modern
Art, New York
Purchase (by exchange)

*Vegetal Seeking for a Home in
Himalayan Winter, 1944*
Tempera on paper, 60 1/2 x
32 1/2 (153.7 x 82.5)
Collection of the artist,
courtesy Schmidt Bingham
Gallery, New York

Continental Bouquet, 1947
Tempera on paper, 13 x
17 1/2 (33 x 45.4)
Collection of Helen and
Marshall Hatch

Gargoyle, 1952
Oil on canvas, 13 1/2 x 13 1/2
(33.7 x 35.2)
Collection of the artist,
courtesy Schmidt Bingham
Gallery, New York

*Half Drunk Hill Female,
1952-53*
Oil on canvas, 30 x 40
(76.2 x 101.6)
Collection of the artist,
courtesy Schmidt Bingham
Gallery, New York

Music, 1954
Graphite on paper, 15 x 21
(38.1 x 53.3)
Collection of Craig Carlson

Bird, 1957
Ink on paper, 42 1/4 x 24 1/4
(108.6 x 62.9)
Collection of Juliet and
Michael Rubenstein

Chair, 1960
Oil on canvas, 52 x 36
(132.1 x 91.4)
Collection of Peter T.
Joseph

*Instrument for a New
Navigation, 1961-62*
Glass, brass, and marble,
24 1/4 x 6 x 6 (61.6 x
15.2 x 15.2)
Collection of Edward
Knowles

*Instrument for a New
Navigation No. 1, 1961-62*
Marble, glass, and chrome-
plated steel, and sheet
lead, 37 3/4 x 18 x 19 1/2
(95.9 x 45.7 x 49.5)
National Air and Space
Museum, Smithsonian
Institution, Washington, D.C.

*Instrument for a New
Navigation No. 2, 1961-62*
Marble, red and blue glass,
and brass, 36 1/4 x 14 x 14
(92.4 x 35.6 x 35.6)
National Air and Space
Museum, Smithsonian
Institution, Washington, D.C.

*Instrument for a New
Navigation No. 3, 1961-62*
Marble, glass, and chrome-
plated steel, 33 1/2 x
14 x 14 (90.5 x 35.6 x 35.6)
National Air and Space
Museum, Smithsonian
Institution, Washington, D.C.

Black Ink Radish, 1964
Ink on paper, 14 1/2 x 10 1/2
(37.5 x 26.7)
Collection of the artist,
courtesy Schmidt Bingham
Gallery, New York

Sidewalk Drinking Fountain, 1934-35

Black Ink Root, 1964
Ink on paper, 14 1/4 x 10 1/2
(37.5 x 26.7)
Collection of the artist,
courtesy Schmidt Bingham
Gallery, New York

Plant, 1964
Graphite on paper, 18 x 15
(45.7 x 38.1)
Collection of the artist,
courtesy Schmidt Bingham
Gallery, New York

Root Plant, 1964
Graphite on paper, 18 x 15
(45.7 x 38.1)
Collection of the artist,
courtesy Schmidt Bingham
Gallery, New York

*Himalayan Winter Bouquet,
1971*
Watercolor on paper, 19 x
14 (48.3 x 35.6)
Collection of Craig Carlson

Winter Bouquet, 1973
Watercolor and tempera
on paper, 13 1/2 x 8 7/8
(34.3 x 22.5)
Collection of Richard E.
Salomon

*Waking, Walking, Singing in
the Next Dimension?, 1979*
Watercolor and tempera
on paper, 24 1/2 x 44 1/4
(62.2 x 112.4)
Collection of the artist,
courtesy Schmidt Bingham
Gallery, New York

*Poorly Winter Still Life,
1983*
Tempera on paper, 26 x 46
(66 x 116.8)
Collection of Helen and
Marshall Hatch

*Winter Still Life with
Japanese Eggplants and New
Guinea Impatiens, 1986*
Watercolor and tempera
on paper, 25 1/2 x 39 (64.7 x
99.1)
Private collection, courtesy
Schmidt Bingham Gallery,
New York

Chocolate Cosmos, 1993
Acrylic on paper, 36 x
26 1/2 (91.4 x 67.3)
Collection of the artist,
courtesy Schmidt Bingham
Gallery, New York

Pacific Rim Image III, 1994
Acrylic on Chinese paper,
26 x 19 (66 x 48.3)
Collection of the artist,
courtesy Schmidt Bingham
Gallery, New York

*Black Lily of the Nile and Re
1996*
Acrylic on Mexican bark
paper, 24 x 17 (61 x 43.2)
Collection of the artist,
courtesy Schmidt Bingham
Gallery, New York

The Five Seasons, 1997
Tempera on paper, five
panels, each 18 x 24
(45.7 x 61)
Collection of the artist,
courtesy Schmidt Bingham
Gallery, New York